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'Dune' Movie Review: From Grand Vision to Sand Trap

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7-9 minutes

Denis Villeneuve's long-awaited—for once that's true—version of "Dune" is the first of his two planned features based on the 1965 novel by Frank Herbert. When Zendaya's Chani, the **love-to-be** of the hero's life, says at the end of the 155-minute saga, "This is only the beginning," it's a laugh line as well as a prophecy. The film, playing simultaneously in theaters (where it should be seen if you're going to see it) and on HBO Max (where it will suffer severely from miniaturization), also **cleaves** into two parts. In the first, a majestic vision set on distant planets far in the future, vivid characters and impressive machines fill the vast screen, and stunning interior spaces alternate with awesome—for once that's the right word—desert landscapes, the likes of which haven't been seen since "Lawrence of Arabia." In the second, the plot machinery **grinds to a halt**, as if **clogged** with sand, and the well-earned welcome **wears out**.

Screen versions of the Herbert novel have had a famously fraught history. The book is a sci-fi classic, acknowledged by George Lucas to be one of the inspirations for "Star Wars," but it's very long, deeply serious and **dauntingly** complex. The Chilean-French filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky once tried to do it as a 14-hour production and, for some odd reason, couldn't

get the project off **terra firma**. David Lynch did it in one semicoherent part, a 1984 testament to the **perils** of lifeless spectacle that most fans of the source material deplored and Mr. Lynch disavowed. If anyone seemed equal to the challenge it was Mr. Villeneuve, who conjured up memorable images of alien life forms as well as their convincingly strange technology in his 2016 “Arrival,” and brought extraordinary **verve** and heart to “Blade Runner 2049,” his 2017 sequel to a sci-fi masterpiece and an undertaking that could have been a desecration in other hands.

Much of what he and his colleagues have done in the earlier stretches of “Dune” validates that hopeful judgment. (The director collaborated on the screenplay with Jon Spaihts and Eric Roth. Patrice Vermette designed the production, which was photographed by the superb Greig Fraser.) For one thing, the movie **conveys** the book’s political context with clarity and conviction. It’s a story with contemporary resonances about an indigenous people, the Fremen, living on a desert planet, Arrakis, and the colonial powers that oppress them in order to extract their planet’s unique treasure, a substance known as spice. (If that description also sounds like “Avatar,” it’s one more tribute to the reach of the Herbert novel.)

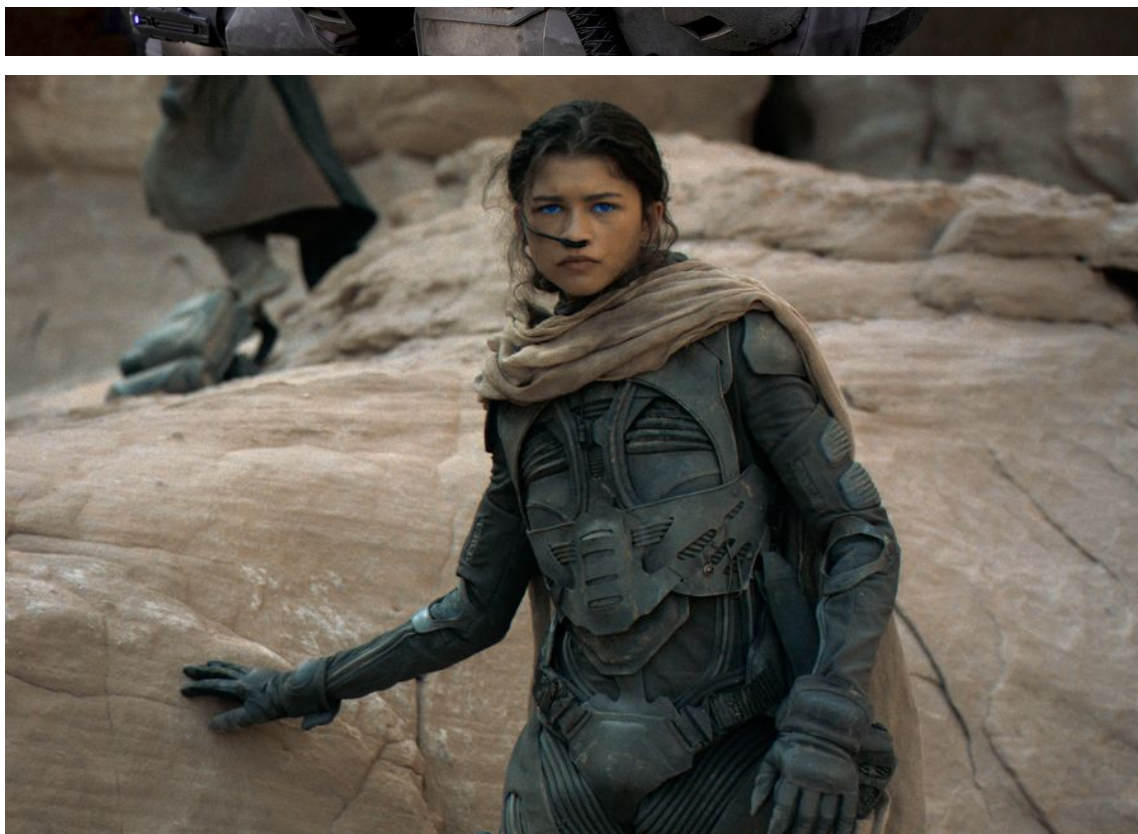
For another, the film has a mature appetite for irony and ambiguity. When the hero, Paul Atreides (Timothée Chalamet), the **scion** of House Atreides, reaches Arrakis, he is greeted by the Fremen as their Messiah, the Chosen One they’ve been awaiting for centuries. Yet the reality is far more complicated than that. Paul’s mother, Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson), says, “They see the signs.” But Paul replies, wisely and **wryly**, “They see what they’re told to see.”

Best of all, the main characters are not just alive—a modest

requirement that went unfulfilled in the 1984 version—but intensely so. Mr. Chalamet is charming and ardent, a fine combination. Any doubts about him fall away during his first sustained scene. On the Atreides's home planet, Caladan, Paul is getting voice lessons from his mother—specifically, she's tutoring him in Voice, a technique involving vocal commands that, when the timbre and frequency are exactly right, cannot be disobeyed. When she pushes too hard, he says, with the endearing annoyance of an overgrown kid, “Mom, I just woke up.”

The wisdom of his casting is matched by that of Ms. Ferguson, who's fascinating in the role. What a good idea to give young Paul a youthful mother who can match wits with him and also join him in battle when she must. The strong cast includes Oscar Isaac as Paul's father, Duke Leto Atreides, and Josh Brolin as weapons master Gurney Halleck. Jason Momoa as the swordmaster Duncan Idaho is, well, Jason Momoa. Javier Bardem as Stilgar, a Fremen tribal leader, has a good comic scene—one of the few—in which all of the participants become spitting images of one another.





*Josh Brolin as Gurney Halleck and Oscar Isaac as Duke Leto Atreides. Zendaya as Chani*Photos: Warner Bros. Entertainment(2)

So far this amounts to a strong vote for Mr. Villeneuve's film, and for its graphic design, in which form follows function but not slavishly enough to be generic. Once Paul and the arrayed forces of House Atreides take up residence on—and supposed stewardship of—Arrakis, however, the movie begins to head south, or that planet's equivalent direction. Yes, the political maneuverings and betrayals are interesting in the abstract—House Atreides has not seen the last of the Fremen's oppressors, House Harkonnen, or their surrogate forces. Yes, Baron Vladimir Harkonnen is no longer the ridiculous and repugnant figure he was in Mr. Lynch's film. Here he's played by Stellan Skarsgård with enough gravitas, if you can say that about a gigantic creature who levitates, to put you in mind of Marlon Brando in "Apocalypse Now." And yes, it's affecting to see Paul struggling to adapt to his new desert surroundings, just as Peter O'Toole's Lawrence did before him.

But there is simply not enough dramatic development to fill the film as a whole. The battles on Arrakis are repetitive and tedious. The giant sandworms **slither** and **gobble**, yet they can't measure up to the ones in "Tremors." A gender switch has been performed on Dr. Liet Kynes, the indigenous planetologist on Arrakis. Now he's a she, a strong woman played by Sharon Duncan-Brewster, but a woman with an underwritten role. Chani, the **heroine-to-be** played by Zendaya, appears only **fleetingly**; she won't come into her own until the next installment, assuming there is one. And the more the movie loosens its grip on hearts and minds, the more mercilessly the music **pounds**. Hans Zimmer's score may not be a crime against humanity, but it's a shattering assault on tympanic membranes. In that sense the theatrical experience continues after you've left the theater.

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